

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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President Obama Announces “New Chapter” in U.S.-Burma Relations

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 17 May 2012

Washington — President Obama has nominated the first U.S. ambassador to Burma in 22 years and announced an easing of financial sanctions on the country in response to its “significant progress along the path to democracy.”

“Today marks the beginning of a new chapter in the relationship between the United States and Burma,” Obama said in a May 17 statement. He said the United States is living up to its pledge to “respond to positive developments in Burma and to clearly demonstrate America’s commitment to the future of an extraordinary country, a courageous people and universal values.”

The president announced the ambassadorial nomination of Derek Mitchell, “whose work has been instrumental in bringing about this new phase” in the U.S.-Burma relationship, along with an easing of bans on financial services exports and new investments in Burma. Obama also said the United States is seeking to enhance people-to-people ties with Burma through student, professional and cultural exchanges.

“Opening up greater economic engagement between our two countries is critical to supporting reformers in government and civil society, facilitating broad-based economic development, and bringing Burma out of isolation and into the international community,” he said.

But he said that while much progress has been made, there is much more to be done.

“The United States remains concerned about Burma’s closed political system, its treatment of minorities and detention of political prisoners, and its relationship with North Korea,” Obama said.

He said the United States will work with Burma to establish a framework for responsible investment from the United States that encourages transparency and oversight and helps to ensure that those who abuse human rights, engage in corruption, interfere with the peace process or obstruct the reform process do not benefit from increased engagement with the United States.

The president said the United States will also continue to press for human rights violators to be held accountable, and maintains the ability to reinstate selected sanctions if there is backsliding on reform efforts.

“Americans for decades have stood with the Burmese people in their struggle to realize the full promise of their

extraordinary country,” Obama said. “In recent months, we have been inspired by the economic and political reforms that have taken place, Secretary Clinton’s historic trip to Naypyitaw and Rangoon, the parliamentary elections and the sight of Aung San Suu Kyi being sworn into office after years of struggle.”

Obama said the United States is “entering a new phase in our engagement on behalf of a more democratic and prosperous future for the Burmese people.”

His remarks came as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton hosted Burmese Foreign Minister U Wunna Maung Lwin for talks at the State Department. Clinton expressed excitement for the minister’s “historic” first visit to Washington and said their talks followed up on a range of bilateral issues initially discussed their December 2011 meeting in Naypyitaw.

Briefing by Secretary Clinton, Burmese Foreign Minister Lwin

17 May 2012

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Office of the Spokesperson

REMARKS

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton And Foreign Minister of Burma U Wunna Maung Lwin After Their Meeting
May 17, 2012

Treaty Room
Washington, D.C.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Good afternoon. I am delighted to welcome the foreign minister here today to Washington. We have been looking forward to Minister Wunna Maung Lwin’s visit and the continuation of the close consultation and cooperation that has begun taking place between our two countries. We met in Nay Pyi Taw last December, and I am very pleased to have you here, sir.

This is a historic visit – the first in decades, and it is a testament to how far we have come together in a short period of time. I want to salute President Thein Sein for his leadership and the leadership of his government as it charts a path of political and democratic reform for his country. I want to salute those like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all who struggled and sacrificed because they believe in a better future for their country as well.

And I want to thank everyone here in the United States who has supported this process and understands the significance of what is happening. In particular, our

partners on Capitol Hill – Republican and Democrat alike – including Senators McConnell, McCain, Kerry, Webb, Shaheen, Congressman Crowley, and others.

This is a moment for us to recognize that the progress which has occurred in the last year toward democratization and national reconciliation is irreversible, as the minister said to me. The United States wants to do everything we can to be sure that is the reality.

I applauded the parliamentary elections and recent steps to bring an end to conflict with the Karen National Union, one of a number of internal conflicts with ethnic minority groups that remain a matter of concern that the government is focused on. And I heard a very promising report from the minister about the additional steps that are being taken to continue reform.

The United States is committed to supporting this reform. We want to encourage it. We acknowledge it. But more than that, we want to be partners in seeing it continue. So today, we are announcing the nomination of Ambassador Derek Mitchell as our new ambassador, the first since 1990. Ambassador Mitchell has been serving as my special representative. He is well known and respected in the region. I urge the United States Senate to quickly confirm him to this new post so he can continue our important work. And I look forward to welcoming your ambassador to Washington.

Today, I am also announcing new steps to permit American investment in the country and export of U.S. financial services. These are the most significant adjustments to our previous policy that have been taken to date. The United States will issue a general license that will enable American businesses to invest across the economy, allow citizens access to international credit markets and dollar-based transactions.

So today, we say to American business: Invest in Burma and do it responsibly; be an agent of positive change and be a good corporate citizen; let's all work together to create jobs, opportunity, and support reform.

Now, these are important steps that will help bring the country into the global economy, spur broad-based economic development, and support ongoing reform. We are doing what others have done – the European Union, the United Kingdom. We are suspending sanctions. We believe that that is the appropriate step for us to take today. We will be keeping relevant laws on the books as an insurance policy, but our goal and our commitment is to move as rapidly as we can to expand business and investment opportunities.

The State Department will work with Congress and our colleagues across government, particularly the Treasury

Department, to be sure we are promoting responsible investment and deterring abuses. We strongly support the private sector being a full partner, and we want our businesses to set a good corporate example of doing business in a transparent, responsible manner.

We'll expect U.S. firms to conduct due diligence to avoid any problems, including human rights abuses. We expect our businesses to create a grievance process that will be accessible to local communities; to demonstrate appropriate treatment of employees, respect for the environment; to be a good corporate citizen; and to promote equitable, sustainable development that will benefit the people.

And we hope that our partners in Europe and Asia will uphold the same high standards. The people have waited a long time because they have every right to expect development that will benefit them, not outsiders or insiders, but instead, the people themselves. Now, we are mindful of a pattern of abuses by companies and others, particularly in the ethnic minority areas. So we will keep our eyes wide open to try to ensure that anyone who abuses human rights or obstructs reforms or engages in corruption do not benefit financially from increased trade and investment with the United States, including companies owned or operated by the military. We will be maintaining the arms embargo, because we want to see amongst the reforms that are taking place a move for the armed forces to be under civilian control.

We will also continue working with the government in Nay Pyi Taw to put in place internationally recognized business and labor practices that foster respect for the rule of law. We will be taking these steps mindful of the difficult decisions that the government has already made and will continue to make. We also would like to see the release of any continued political prisoners and a continued emphasis in law and action to promoting national reconciliation.

The United States is very committed to supporting the end of the ethnic conflicts in the country. We think that the diversity of population is a source of great strength for the country going forward. And yesterday, I had a group of young people who were visiting the United States representing the mosaic of different backgrounds and ethnicities, and it was very exciting to see them all together focused on making their contribution to the future.

We are concerned about violence in Kachin State in recent weeks, and I was very pleased to hear about new mechanisms, both official and nongovernmental, to encourage meaningful dialogue. And as I said, the government must do all it can do. People on the other side of the table in these conflicts also must be willing to

cooperate, to seek an equitable, fair ending to the conflicts. So reconciliation is a priority, and we will continue to support that.

Finally, we discussed our concerns about North Korea. I am encouraged by reports that President Thein Sein has stated he will end the military relationship with North Korea, and the minister assured me that they will fully comply with international obligations on nonproliferation.

I am very, very positive about what is happening, and I know how difficult this will be. It is never easy. I often remind people about the challenges my own country faced. They were faced many, many years ago – so you didn't have the internet, television, constant attention being paid, as we struggle to live up to our own hopes and aspirations. So this is going to be an exciting, challenging journey for your country and those of us who are committed to supporting you.

But I am very pleased that the United States is taking these steps today, encouraging our businesses to go and help you grow your economy, encouraging our nongovernmental organizations to go and partner with you on education, healthcare, the environment, and so much else.

So, Minister, thank you for being here today, and I look forward to continuing to work with you.

FOREIGN MINISTER WUNNA MAUNG LWIN: Thank you very much, Madam Secretary. Ladies and gentlemen, I have come to Washington, D.C. on an official visit at the invitation of Secretary Clinton. And this afternoon, we had a friendly and cordial discussion on matters relating to further promotion of bilateral relations. I have also had the opportunity to call on Senator McCain, Senator McConnell, and Senator Jim Webb. I also meet with – I will also meet with Deputy Secretary of State William Burns later this afternoon.

And during my meeting with them, they reiterated their recognition and support of the ongoing reforms undertaken by the government and President Thein Sein in Myanmar. We also discussed about further strengthening of relationship and cooperation in various areas of mutual interest, increased assistance to the people of Myanmar, and lifting of sanctions and restrictions imposed by the United States against Myanmar.

I have expressed our appreciations to the government and the people of the United States for supporting our efforts of reforms and the transition to democracy, and reiterated our determination to continue our reforms. The decision on the appointment of ambassadors in both countries is an important step forward in our efforts to resumption of

normal diplomatic relations after more than 20 years.

Ambassador U Than Shwe will be the ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United States. He is currently serving as permanent representative of Myanmar to the United Nations in New York. I have full confidence in him, because he has done an excellent job as our interlocutor with the United States side since we began dialogue for resumption of normal diplomatic relations over the last several months.

I am also blessed that Ambassador Derek Mitchell will be the new U.S. ambassador to Myanmar. And Ambassador Mitchell is no stranger to Myanmar. In the past 12 months, he has successfully served as a U.S. special representative and policy coordinator for Myanmar, during which I had the pleasure to work with him very closely.

So my congratulations to both of them and wish them all the best for their new important responsibilities. I wish to thank Secretary Clinton for inviting me to Washington for official visit. I would like to express our appreciation to the State Department and the United States Government for the warm welcome and gracious hospitality accorded to us, as well as for the excellent arrangements made for us during our stay in Washington. I thank you all.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you so much.

FOREIGN MINISTER WUNNA MAUNG LWIN: Thank you.

MS. NULAND: We have two today. We'll start with (inaudible).

QUESTION: Secretary Clinton, regarding the easing of economic restrictions, will the – will U.S. companies be able to invest and trade with Myanmar state-owned companies, including in the oil and gas sector? And also, you talk about the corporate responsibilities of U.S. companies. Will these expectations be binding under U.S. law?

And, Minister, could I ask you – there is a lot of international concern about the continued detention of political prisoners. Can you say whether these prisoners, of which people say there are hundreds – are they going to be released? And if so, when will they be released?

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, thank you. First, let me say our presumption is that our companies will be able to deal in every sector of the economy with any business. That is a rebuttable presumption in the event that there is a company whose reputation, whose practices, are not in keeping with our stated policies of corporate

responsibility or other matters that rise to our attention. But the presumption is that our oil and gas companies, our mining companies, our financial services companies are all now free to look for investments that can be mutually beneficial to Burma and to them.

Now, we are taking these steps in a measured, responsible way. We are keeping on the books all legislation and executive authorities that does give us flexibility, if the facts warrant, to tighten sanctions again – similar, as I said, to what the EU, the UK, and others have done. And moving forward, we will be working with our businesses to be sure that they do exercise the highest standards of corporate responsibility.

When I was in Burma, I heard stories about some companies that didn't have a good reputation for the way they treated people, didn't have good working conditions, didn't abide by the basics of how you should run a company. They weren't American companies, but it came to my mind that I want people to look at American companies and say that's how you should treat workers, that's how you should treat the environment, you shouldn't deal with bad customers; you should deal with respectable, responsible businesses if they're state-owned or if they are private and independent.

So we are very confident that suspending these sanctions and moving forward is exactly the right step to take for now, and we're enthusiastically encouraging American businesses to invest.

FOREIGN MINISTER WUNNA MAUNG LWIN: Well, for the question you have asked to me about the prisoners, the president has granted amnesty four times in the past 12 months, past 12 or 13 months. About 28,000 prisoners were released from prison, and we have (inaudible) lists, so-called political prisoners, from the European Union as well as from the United States. And after the last amnesty, which has been granted in January, most of the people included in these lists were released.

And there are some remaining from the lists. After thoroughly checking and investigating these lists, there are – they are some prisoners who have criminal offenses, such as murder, rapes, or connecting to terrorist activities. But the president, in exercising his mandate invested upon him by the constitution, he will further granted amnesties when appropriate. I think this will answer your question.

MS. NULAND: Last question, (inaudible) from VOA Burma.

QUESTION: Actually, I have two parts of the questions and plus I'd like to address to the Madam Secretary and Minister Wunna Muang Lwin. Since the United States is

easing the sanctions, could that cause collide with the China, which is quite influential in the region? And also, we have seen the report of the concerns from the Chinese officials. And also, last year we have seen that China is disappointed after suspension of Myitsone dam project. Thank you.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, let me say what I said when I was in Nay Pyi Taw. The United States does not expect any country to give up relationships with their neighbors. And China is a neighbor, and there are longstanding ties that certainly are deep in the soils of both nations. What we are doing is providing additional support for the kind of development, both politically and economically, that the reform process, which the government in Nay Pyi Taw has begun, has made possible.

Because we do value representative government, democracy, good working conditions, protection of the environment, the kinds of things that the United States stands for, we hope that our relationship can be one that is very supportive of what I am told are the steps that the government and the people themselves wish to take.

So this is not about any other nation. This is between us. This is rooted in the changes we have watched happen and our desire to support the continuation of those changes. And we fully expect that there will be many countries, as you've already seen, who want to develop stronger and better relationships in the neighborhood, in the region, and around the world. And we think that's good to open up the country, give the people more opportunities. So we are very pleased to be a partner in this.

FOREIGN MINISTER WUNNA MAUNG LWIN: Informing on the part of the relationship with China, we have a very long, traditional, and historical relation with China. We have very good relations with China, as we are neighboring countries sharing the common border of more than 2,000 kilometers. So we are cooperating with China. We are inviting investments. There are investment from China.

And according to the suspension of the Myitsone project, we have our domestic concerns, and then we have suspended that and we have informed that cordially to the Chinese side. And this is only a part of the cooperation between China and Myanmar. They can – they understand the situation very well. And I do not want to support your comments that China is disappointed with that, because we have explained the situation very clearly to the authorities and the respective and responsible ministry, and the Chinese company are discussing about the matter also. We have had a very good cooperation with China. So I think that this will not

jeopardize the future relations with China.

On the part of the relation with United States, we have this pillar of our foreign policy to have good, friendly relations with – relationships with all the countries around the world. In this aspect, we are working closely with United States to have a strong bilateral relations with United States also.

SECRETARY CLINTON: Thank you very much.

President Obama Hosts 2012 G8 and NATO Summits

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer | 17 May 2012

Washington — President Obama will host the 2012 Group of Eight (G8) Summit of advanced economies at the Maryland presidential retreat, Camp David, to discuss the global economy and the current situation in Europe and will host the 28-member NATO Summit in Chicago for talks on defense and security cooperation, including the transition in Afghanistan, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon says.

The G8 Summit is set for May 18-19, and the NATO Summit for May 20-21. The G8 consists of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States. All but Japan and Russia are also members of the NATO alliance, though Russia participates in the NATO-Russia Council.

"The two summits really do underscore and are an embodiment of American leadership on a range of global challenges and advancing several overarching U.S. interests: making the international architecture work effectively in a transformational world; second, revitalizing our core alliances; and, three, really advancing our strategies in the war in Afghanistan in a responsible fashion," Donilon told journalists at a May 17 White House briefing.

"And as a result of our engagement in bilateral, multilateral levels over the course of the administration, we're leading in both of these forums, and I think we'll see during the course of this weekend real progress made on the goals that I just talked about," he added.

Donilon said the G8 leaders will meet on the evening of May 18 for a broad discussion and will consider the range of options they have for addressing pressing security and economic issues. Some of the topics that are expected to be discussed at the traditional working dinner: Iran's efforts to build a nuclear bomb, North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the easing of sanctions on Burma and its transition toward democracy, and Syria, he added. The next day will focus closely on the global economy, as well as the economic stresses in the European Union and the comprehensive approach to managing the situation.

Following those talks, the G8 leaders will hold separate discussions on energy and climate issues, global food security, Afghanistan's economic needs, and the political and security evolution occurring in the Middle East and North Africa, Donilon said.

The presidency of the G8 rotates among the eight member-nations annually, and besides hosting the annual summit the host country also sets the agenda for the meetings. In addition to working dinners and meetings, the G8 also invites nations from other regions to deal with specific security and economic issues. Obama has asked the leaders of the African nations of Benin, Ghana, Ethiopia and Tanzania to attend meetings to discuss agricultural issues and food security, Donilon said.

Donilon said that the G8 meetings, though an official summit of world leaders, tend to be more informal gatherings in which the eight leaders discuss a wide range of political, economic and security issues in a relatively intimate setting, less structured and offering more give-and-take. It is why Camp David was selected as the meeting site, he added.

The global economy, still recovering from the 2007-2009 recession, has been buffeted by wide swings in oil prices, financial crises in Europe and slowly recovering employment. And the United States, under a National Export Initiative launched by Obama, has been trying to shift a largely consumer-dominated economy to one more balanced with a broader and substantial export sector.

"The United States welcomes the evolving discussion and debate in Europe about the imperative for jobs and growth," Donilon said. "The United States has an extraordinarily significant stake in the outcome of the economic discussions in Europe and the steps that are taken in Europe." The European Union is the United States' largest trading partner, he added.

Obama leaves for Chicago May 19 where he will host 61 nations and several international organizations for the NATO Summit.

"NATO is the cornerstone alliance for the United States in terms of its ability to advance its international interests," Donilon said. One of the crucial priorities of the administration has been to strengthen its relationships with an array of alliances, he said, and NATO is a part of that effort.

Donilon said Obama will meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai early on May 20 before the main summit begins because the course of the security transition that involves NATO allies and others in Afghanistan will be a significant focus of the alliance talks.

The international alliance in Afghanistan is beginning a gradual transition process in which the Afghan National Army assumes an increasing role for the country's security against a Taliban insurgency.

"What this summit is about is the next steps on that transition project, that transition till the end of 2014 and beyond," he added.

That process began with the 2010 Lisbon NATO Summit, and the members have been following that strategy, which calls for the International Security Assistance Force to turn over increasing responsibility to Afghans and a full transition so that the combat role is over by the end of 2014.

Secretary Clinton Hosts Global Civil Society Summit

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 16 May 2012

Washington — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says the U.S. government is working to better support civil society leaders around the world as they work to improve democracies, protect human rights and respond to humanitarian needs.

"The world is going through an extraordinary, historic change," the secretary said in her May 16 address to the Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society 2012 Summit.

"In the face of an upsurging civil society, some governments have responded by cracking down harder than ever," Clinton said. "But each time a reporter is silenced or an activist is threatened, it doesn't strengthen a government; it weakens a nation."

The secretary, speaking at the State Department, addressed nearly 200 representatives of civil society and government from 40 countries in person, and thousands more who participated in the summit virtually and through U.S. Embassy viewing parties.

Clinton said that more people are living under governments of their own choosing than ever before, and added that she is "humbled by the courage of so many people around the world right now ... who are contributing to this historic tide."

But while she is optimistic about the future, she said, she is also realistic about the challenges ahead.

"The pathway to that future of greater democracy, freedom, human rights, human dignity is going to be a hard road for many millions and millions of people around the world," Clinton said. "Therefore, we have to continue making the case for respect and tolerance and openness that is at the root of any true, sustainable democracy."

The secretary said strengthening civil societies around the world is critical to this effort. That's why the United States is providing political and financial support for embattled civil society groups around the world.

"We hope that by holding meetings like this one, we can demonstrate that civil society should be viewed not as a threat, but an asset," Clinton said.

"We are enthusiastic about the future of civil society, and we want to use this dialogue, as we have for the last year, to be a vehicle of the exchange of ideas, for the promotion of new approaches and for an accounting, because we want to do what works and quit doing what doesn't work," she said.

Clinton said the United States is acting on a series of policy recommendations generated by civil society working groups since the inaugural Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society Summit in February 2011. She said these recommendations cover several areas, including strengthening engagement with groups focusing on religion, democracy and human rights, labor, women's empowerment and combating corruption.

"We're trying to help those of you who are on the front lines," the secretary said. "At the end of the day, we want our help and support for civil society and political change to actually have advanced the cause of freedom and human dignity and human rights and democracy."

U.S. Freezes Assets of South Asian Drug Traffickers

16 May 2012

Washington — The United States on May 15 designated two lieutenants of a major South Asian criminal organization under the U.S. Kingpin Act, freezing any assets they may have under U.S. jurisdiction.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) named Chhota Shakeel and Ibrahim "Tiger" Memon as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act for their roles as part of a criminal organization run by Dawood Ibrahim known as "D Company."

"Treasury continues to target the nexus of crime and terrorism in South Asia with today's action against one of the world's most notorious criminal organizations," said OFAC Director Adam Szubin, according to a Treasury Department news release.

In addition to freezing the two men's U.S. assets, the Treasury Department action prohibits U.S. persons from conducting financial or commercial transactions with them.

Criminal boss Dawood Ibrahim was named as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in October 2003, and in June 2006, he was named by the president as a Significant Foreign Narcotics Trafficker. Also in June 2006, the Dawood Ibrahim organization was named by the president as a Significant Foreign Narcotics Trafficker.

Shakeel is Dawood's lieutenant who coordinates D Company's interactions with other organized crime and terror groups. Memon is a trusted lieutenant who controls the organization's businesses across South Asia and is wanted by Indian authorities for his involvement in the 1993 Mumbai bombings.

Interpol has issued provisional arrest warrants or "red notices" for both Shakeel and Memon, who are Indian nationals.

Ibrahim and his organization have been involved in international narcotics trafficking since the late 1980s. Their smuggling routes include South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. D Company's drug trafficking activities include smuggling heroin and hashish from Afghanistan and Thailand to the United States, Western Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa.

The Treasury Department continues to target the financial networks of significant foreign narcotics traffickers and their organizations worldwide using the authorities in the Kingpin Act. Treasury has designated more than 1,100 individuals and entities linked to drug kingpins since June 2000.

Penalties for violations of the Kingpin Act range from civil penalties of up to \$1.075 million per violation to more severe criminal penalties. Criminal penalties for corporate officers may include up to 30 years in prison and fines of up to \$5 million. Criminal fines for corporations may reach \$10 million. Other individuals face up to 10 years in prison and fines.

U.S. Condemns "Ridiculous" Syrian Elections Held Amid Violence

By Stephen Kaufman | Staff Writer | 15 May 2012

Washington — Syria's May 7 parliamentary elections were "an illegitimate process" illegitimately timed while violence in the country continued, State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland said, and the United States does not consider them to be free, fair, transparent or representative of the will of the Syrian people.

"We consider it pretty ridiculous to try to have voting in the middle of the kind of violence and lack of harmony and unity that we see in Syria right now. So we don't put a lot of stock in these elections," Nuland told reporters May 15.

According to United Nations estimates, at least 9,000 people have died since pro-democracy protests began against Bashar al-Assad's regime in March 2011.

The United States is "deeply concerned about the escalating violence on the ground, the country's deepening sectarianism," Nuland said, as well as the Assad regime's failure to allow the political transition outlined in U.N. Special Envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan. The plan calls for a "Syrian-led political process to address the aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people," as well as an end to violence, the release of political prisoners, freedom to demonstrate peacefully, and free access throughout the country for humanitarian aid and journalists.

The Assad regime has failed to live up to any parts of Annan's plan, and "not only is the regime still firing on its own people, not only has it not pulled back its heavy weapons, but this has created a climate where violence by other spoilers is increasingly common," Nuland said, referring to recent attacks targeting Syrian security forces.

Nuland said the opposition Syrian National Council has distanced itself from the violent attacks and explosions that occurred outside of Damascus and elsewhere, and other groups have claimed responsibility for the violence.

But she said for a long time there has been a concern that "the longer Assad perpetrated violence himself, allowed and fostered a climate of violence, the more folks who don't have the best interests of Syrians at heart would exploit that situation. And we're seeing more of that."

She also called the targeting of U.N. observers in the country "deplorable."

The observers "are there in an unarmed capacity to try to bring about a commitment by the Assad regime and by all actors in Syria to, first and foremost, to cease fire. To fire on them is to undo the future for Syrians," Nuland said.

There are currently around 250 U.N. monitors inside Syria. Nuland said that in areas where they are able to be present, "we see violence stop, we see peaceful demonstrations begin again, we see people able to gather and talk about a transition."

"But whenever monitors have to leave, the violence resumes. So we remain concerned that we continue to have a regime that has not lived up to its commitments," Nuland said.

To put pressure on the Assad regime to end the violence and allow a peaceful transition, the United States, the Arab League and the European Union have enacted sanctions that have had a "profound" effect on the Syrian

economy, forcing Assad to “run through more than half of his reserves,” and forced the value of the Syrian currency to plummet, she said.

The United States hopes the sanctions will “affect the thinking” of those in the Syrian political and business classes who are still supporting Assad, and who “have to see that there's no future for them, for their families, for their country, if they stick with this guy and those in the military who continue to obey orders to fire,” Nuland said.

At the same time, she said, there have been more troops defecting from the regime's security forces, and more Syrians have been moving their families and assets outside of the country.

USAID Welcomes Guidelines on Land Governance, Property Rights

14 May 2012

Washington — The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) May 11 welcomed a U.N. panel's endorsement of voluntary guidelines and practices that can help countries establish laws and policies that better govern land, fisheries and forests tenure rights.

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security were endorsed by the United Nations Committee on World Food Security in Rome, and aim to support food security and sustainable development.

“The U.S. supports policies that create more transparent, accountable, accessible, predictable and stable access to land, which will enable private sector investment,” said Gregory Myers, USAID senior adviser for land tenure and property rights and chairman of the guidelines negotiation process. “The Voluntary Guidelines give countries a much-needed mechanism to protect rights and promote good land governance in a way that will encourage sustainable and responsible investment.”

Around the world, women in particular face major obstacles in accessing and obtaining rights to land. In many instances, a woman's right to land comes through marriage and can be lost if her spouse dies. Where implemented, the voluntary guidelines will bring clarity of tenure rights for all people and will especially affect the lives of women, USAID said.

Secure tenure rights create better environments for investments in agriculture, reduce land-related conflicts, promote improved natural resource management and address challenges related to climate change, USAID said. Nations that consult the voluntary guidelines when

drafting their property rights laws and regulations may achieve many of these benefits, the agency added.

The United States is actively supporting improvements in land governance that strengthen the land and resource rights of local people and communities. In the past five years, USAID has funded \$200 million in land tenure programming in 30 countries around the world.

The voluntary guidelines are the result of an unprecedented negotiation process that featured broad consultation and participation by 96 national governments, more than 25 civil society organizations, the private sector, nonprofit groups, and farmers' associations over the course of almost three years.

U.S. Government Expands Program for International Students

14 May 2012

Washington — The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced May 11 an expanded list of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) designated-degree programs that qualify eligible graduates on student visas for an optional practical training (OPT) extension.

The department said the action builds on a series of administrative reforms designed to increase the department's commitment to attracting international students.

“Attracting the best and brightest international talent to our colleges and universities and enabling them to contribute to their professional growth is an important part of our nation's economic, scientific and technological competitiveness,” said Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano. “International students and exchange visitors bring invaluable contributions to our nation, and this helps empower the next generation of international entrepreneurs, right here in America.”

Under the OPT program, international students who graduate from colleges and universities in the United States are able to remain in the country and receive training through work experience for up to 12 months. Students who graduate from a designated STEM degree program can remain for an additional 17 months on an OPT STEM extension.

By expanding the list of designated STEM degree programs to include such fields as pharmaceutical sciences, econometrics and quantitative economics, the department said it is helping to bring the best, most qualified international students to the United States.

These reforms, the department said, reflect the Obama

administration's commitment to promote policies that embrace talented students from other countries, who come to study in U.S. colleges and universities and enrich the nation by allowing highly skilled foreign graduates to extend their post-graduate training in the United States and work in their field of study upon graduation.

A full list of expanded STEM degrees is available on the DHS website.

Earlier this year, DHS announced several measures the department will implement to streamline existing pathways for immigrant entrepreneurs to create businesses in the U.S., retain more foreign-born science and technology graduates from U.S. universities, facilitate immigration by top researchers, and help U.S. startups and other companies compete for global talent.

Defense Leaders Discuss Syria, Yemen

By Karen Parrish | American Forces Press Service |
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This article was originally posted May 10 to the Department of Defense website.

Washington — The Defense Department's senior civilian and military officer offered their perspectives on the ongoing unrest in Syria and the threat al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula poses in Yemen.

Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta and Army General Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters during a press conference May 10 that internal strife in Syria remains an issue of great concern.

The Syrian people's revolt against ruler President Bashar al-Assad's regime began in early 2011. Since then, Assad's military has battled rebel forces in several cities. Estimates of those killed, both combatants and civilians, reach as high as 17,000-plus.

The secretary acknowledged the cease-fire nominally in place in Syria as part of former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's peace plan "does not appear to be working."

"We continue to urge Assad to step down, that there must be a change there," Panetta said. "They've lost their legitimacy by the huge number of deaths that are taking place in Syria."

He emphasized the United States continues to work with other nations to bring diplomatic and economic pressure on Assad. The goal, Panetta said, is to implement political reforms, "have Assad step down and to try to return Syria to the Syrian people."

Dempsey added he has consulted on the issue with his counterparts in Syria's neighbor nations.

"Two weeks ago, I was in Jordan," the chairman said. "Today my Turkish counterpart is in the building, and we're trying to gain a common understanding of where we think we are and where we think we might want to go."

Jordan is very concerned about the potential for increased refugees from the conflict, Dempsey said.

"That's a concern that an individual country might have that wouldn't necessarily be ours, but it's important to understand the complexity of the situation," he added.

Panetta said he has seen intelligence reports indicating an al-Qaida presence in Syria.

"Frankly, we don't have very good intelligence as to just exactly what their activities are," he said.

The group's presence anywhere is a concern, he said, adding, "We need to continue to do everything we can to determine what kind of influence they are trying to exert there."

Turning to Yemen, the secretary said DOD's announcement earlier this week that U.S. military personnel are again training Yemeni forces does not mean U.S. ground forces are engaged there.

Panetta noted the disclosure this week of a failed al-Qaida plot to attack a U.S. airliner. The attack was planned to happen in Yemen, which demonstrated that the Yemen-based al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula remains a threat, he added.

"We will go after al-Qaida wherever they are and wherever they try to hide. And one of the places that they clearly are located is Yemen," he said.

The United States does have operations there, and Yemeni officials have been "very cooperative" in those activities, the secretary said.

"Our operations now are directed with the Yemenis going after al-Qaida," he said, adding there is "no consideration" of U.S. military ground operations in Yemen.

U.S. efforts to target al-Qaida leaders — such as the September 30 U.S. airstrike in Yemen that killed terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki — have been very successful, he noted.

"I think the fact that ... we continue to be successful with regards to these kinds of threats is an indication of the

effectiveness of the operations that we have there," Panetta said.

He added, "I do believe that we are making effective progress at going after those specific targets that represent real threats to the United States."

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